

CLAIM SUMMARY DOCUMENT

Claims 1-6. (Canceled)

Claim 7. (Allowed) In a process of air-curing tobacco leaves, the improvement comprising reducing air-curing time by treating the tobacco leaves with an alkaline curing accelerating agent.

Claim 8. (Allowed) The process according to Claim 7, wherein the treating step comprises treating the leaves with a solution containing bicarbonate and/or carbonate anion.

Claim 9. (Allowed) The process according to Claim 7, wherein said curing accelerating agent comprises an aqueous solution containing a bicarbonate and/or a carbonate salt, said bicarbonate salt comprising one or more of sodium bicarbonate, ammonium bicarbonate or potassium bicarbonate or the carbonate salt comprises one or more of sodium carbonate, ammonium carbonate or potassium carbonate.

Claim 10. (Allowed) The process of Claim 8, wherein the air-curing includes the step of reducing moisture content of a darkened tobacco portion to a preselected, final moisture content in the range of 10 to 30%.

Claim 11. (Allowed) The process of Claim 10, wherein the air-curing time is initiated and completed within 7 days.

Claim 12. (Allowed) The process according to Claim 10, further comprising the steps of selectively stripping brown leaves from air-cured tobacco leaves during the air-curing, the method further comprising drying primed leaves apart from remaining leaves on the plant.

Claim 13. (Allowed) The process according to Claim 10, wherein brown leaves are primed from air-cured tobacco leaves during the air-curing, the method further comprising drying the primed leaves after removing midveins of the primed leaves.

Claim 14. (Allowed) The process according to Claim 11, wherein the air-curing is completed before substantial growth of bacteria on and/or production of TSNAs by the leaves.

Claim 15. (Allowed) A method of accelerating the coloring of tobacco during a curing process, said method comprising the steps of:
spraying a tobacco with aqueous solution of a carbonate or bicarbonate salt; and
drying said sprayed tobacco into a cured condition, whereby time required to yellow said tobacco is reduced.

Claim 16. (Allowed) The method as claimed in Claim 15, wherein said drying step includes placing said tobacco in an arrangement to effect air curing, said spraying step includes spraying said tobacco prior to said placing step.

Claim 17. (Allowed) The method as claimed in Claim 16, further comprising the step of allowing the sprayed solution to at least partially dry on surfaces of said tobacco prior to said placing step.

Claim 18. (Allowed) The method as claimed in Claim 17, wherein said drying step includes a fixing step of contacting said tobacco with dry air so as to establish a final cured condition of said tobacco, said fixing step being executed subsequent of said time required to yellow said tobacco, said fixing step being completed within seven days.

Claim 19. (Allowed) A process of converting green tobacco into smokable material, said process comprising the steps of:

initiating an air-curing treatment of green tobacco leaves, said air-curing treatment including the steps of transforming said green tobacco into a yellowed condition and the step of further transforming said tobacco into a darkened condition;

proximate in time to said initiating step, treating said tobacco with an alkaline curing-accelerating agent;

separating darkened tobacco leaves from yellowed tobacco leaves; and

proximate in time to said separating step, drying said separated, darkened tobacco leaves; repeating said further transforming, separating and drying steps upon remaining yellowed tobacco leaves.

Claim 20. (Allowed) The process of Claim 19, wherein said drying step includes the step of reducing moisture content of the darkened tobacco portion to a preselected, final moisture content such that said dried tobacco does not support microbial activity.

Claim 21. (Allowed) The process of Claim 20, wherein said drying step includes the step of reducing moisture content of the darkened tobacco portion to a preselected, final moisture content in the range of 10 to 30%.

Claim 22. (Allowed) The process of Claim 21, wherein said drying step is completed within seven days.

Claim 23. (Allowed) The process of Claim 20, wherein said method further comprises the step of destemming said separated, darkened tobacco portion.

Claim 24. (Allowed) The process of Claim 20, wherein said curing-accelerating agent comprises a wash solution comprising a bicarbonate salt and/or carbonate salt.

Claim 25. (Allowed) The process of Claim 20, wherein said tobacco is burley.

Claim 26. (Allowed) A method of treating tobacco leaves to effect curing comprising treating the leaves with an alkaline curing-accelerating agent, yellowing the leaves, browning the leaves and separately drying the browned leaves from remaining leaves.

Claim 27. (Allowed) The method of Claim 26, wherein said curing-accelerating agent comprises a carbonate and/or bicarbonate salt.

Claims 28-55. (Canceled)